

The phrase is familiar...

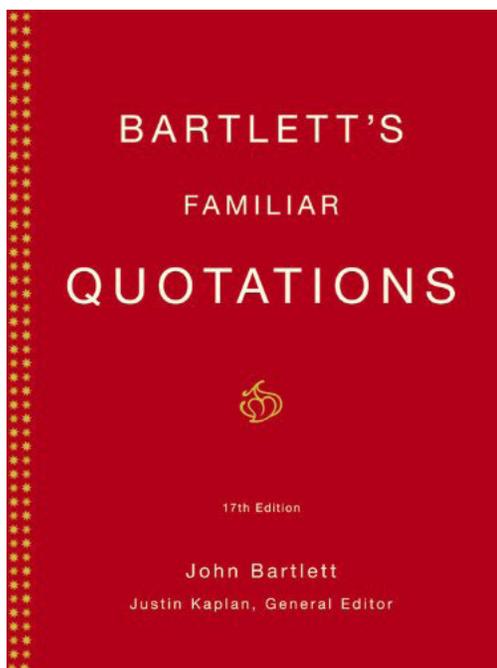
## Who said it?

By Charles Livingston McCain

"THE MORE things change, the more they remain the same." Sound familiar? Millions of people have spoken this platitude millions of times. But somebody said it first. That somebody was the French novelist Alphonse Karr (1808-1890). Though his novels are forgotten, his words live on in this proverb.

The proverbs, platitudes, and clichés that we use each day were made up by someone, usually a long time ago.

"Do not count your chickens before they are hatched." Did your mother ever say this to you? She was not alone. Mothers have been saying this to their children for about 25 centuries. Who said it first? Aesop did - or rather he wrote his saying in one of his fables sometime in the fifth century BC. Most of us quote Aesop quite often, for he coined such expressions as: "Appearances are often deceiving," "Familiarity breeds contempt," and "Put your shoulder to the wheel."



But you, dear reader, may wish to argue with me over who first uttered these proverbs. And that is fine, for, "There are two sides to every question" (Protagoras, fifth century BC). But I am an honest man. "I call a fig a fig, a spade a spade" (Menander, third century BC). I will not mislead you. Then give us the source of your material, you demand. Well, my friend, "No sooner said than done," (Quintus Ennius, second century BC). My faithful source is *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, that world-famous compendium of memorable human utterances. If you browse through this book, you will discover the surprising sources of many popular sayings.

Have you ever described a frightening experience by saying, "My heart was in my mouth?" Or have you ever characterized a person as, "not worth his salt?" Then you are quoting the Roman satirist Gaius Petronius, who lived in the first century AD.

Although we cannot always trace the originator of every saying, we can trace the sayings back to the time when they first came into general use. Such expressions as "Beware of dog," "There is no accounting for taste," "Necessity is the mother of invention," and "Tall oaks from little acorns grow" are all old Latin proverbs that date from the time of the Roman Empire.

But the Romans did not invent every proverb. Many of them were made up after the fall of Rome. John Wycliffe, who lived in the fourteenth century, coined the phrase, "By hook or by crook." And in the fifteenth century Gabriel Bell said, "You get what you pay for;" Desiderius Erasmus complained of "A peck of troubles;" and Rabelais spoke of a task "Performed to a 'T'."

With all these proverbs popping up in century after century of conversations, one might expect that somebody would have gathered them up and put them in a book. Somebody did. His name was John Heywood and, in 1546, he published a book titled *Proverbs*, a collection of English colloquial sayings. Included in this tome were such favorites as, "She looketh as butter would not melt in her mouth," "Beggars should not be choosers," "Better half a loaf than no bread," "Tit for tat," and "The moon is made of green cheese."

England was not the only country to have a book of proverbs. Its American colony had one too. In 1733, Benjamin Franklin began to write and publish *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Franklin popularized such famous sayings as, "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise," "Don't throw stones at your neighbor's, if your own windows are made of glass," and "God helps them that help themselves." But Franklin did not print all his pithy sayings in his almanac. He reserved a few gems for his personal use, as when, in a letter to a friend, he wrote, "...in this world nothing is certain but death and taxes."

Franklin was so successful in so many things that it may be said of him that "Nothing succeeds like success," a phrase first written by the French novelist Alexandre Dumas, who also coined the expression "All for one and one for all," which is, if you recall, the motto of the Three Musketeers.

Next to novelists and almanac writers, it appears that military men most often uttered quotable phrases. Who can forget "War is hell," spoken by the US Civil War General William T. Sherman, or "Remember the Alamo!" shouted by Colonel Sidney Sherman at the battle of San Jacinto in 1836? But it was US Admiral David Farragut who bellowed one of the most memorable of all military quotes when he said, "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!" at the battle of Mobile Bay in 1864.

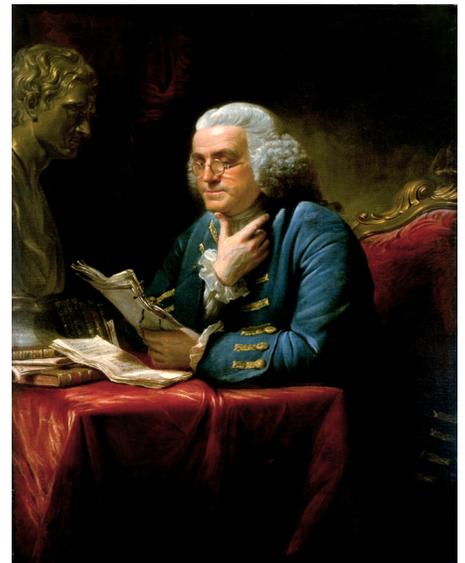


Photo # 80-G-K-17587 Captain James Lawrence, USN. Portrait by J. Herring



Speaking of the navy, who cannot recall the famous cry, "Don't give up the ship"? Surely this exhortation has inspired many ship captains during battle. However, this is not quite what Captain James Lawrence said back in 1813 as he lay dying on the deck of the frigate USS *Chesapeake*. He said, "Tell the men to fire faster and not to give up the ship; fight her till she sinks." Sadly, his crew did not and the *Chesapeake* was captured by the British.

And finally, there is the great slogan of the American Revolution, "Don't fire till you see the whites of their eyes." King Frederick the Great of Prussia said this, or rather ordered it, in 1757.

As far as military quotes go, "I am at the end of my tether" (Royall Tyler, 1787). So I will move to the more tranquil fields of romance and the home. Most people get married, though oftentimes a person's friends cannot understand why a particular mate was picked. But "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" (Margaret Hungerford, 1878). Of course, after marriage a couple will set up housekeeping, each desiring "A place for everything and everything in its place" (Isabella Beeton, 1861).

Finally, I wrap things up with a political quote. As 1984 draws near, people may warn: "Big Brother is watching you." If they say this, they are quoting Eric Blair. And who is Eric Blair? He is the man who, at the start of his writing career, adopted the pen name George Orwell.

So, the next time you spout what you believe to be an original saying, check *Bartlett's* to be sure - even if you say something silly. For as the great Roman orator Cicero said in the first century B.C., "There is nothing so ridiculous but some philosopher has said it."

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*Free-lance journalist Charles Livingston McCain originates his words of wisdom (helped by his well-thumbed Bartlett's) in his home in West Palm Beach, Florida, USA. - or so he says.*